

# **THE FAMINE OF 1770**

**BY**  
**HEMENDRA PRASAD GHOSE**

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To  
My Non-Bengalee Comrades in Journalism  
this history of a previous famine is  
gratefully dedicated for their  
sympathy for suffering  
Bengal, 1943.



## THE FAMINE OF 1770

The year 1770 A. D. was a year of death, desolation and destruction for Bengal. In that year a famine of unprecedented severity appeared in Bengal and swept away "at least one-third of the inhabitants." This estimate, given in a letter written by Warren Hastings, A. Barker and others to the Hon'ble the Court of Directors of the East India Company on the 3rd November, 1772 has been accepted by all official and by accurate non-official writers like Mill and Auber. The effect of this devastating calamity resulted in the steady increase in depopulation for the first fifteen years after the famine, because :—

(1) "During a scarcity it is the children on whom the calamity falls with the heaviest weight, and until 1785 the old died off without there being any rising generation to step into their places."

(2) As Sir H. Bartle E. Frere has put it—"men are death-stricken by famine long before they die. The effects of insufficient food long continued may shorten life after a period of some years, or it may be of months or days. But invariably there is a point which is often

reached long before death actually ensues, when not even the tenderest care and most scientific nursing can restore a sufficiency of vital energy to enable the sufferer to regain even apparent temporary health and strength. Add to this that the consequences of famine, in death from fevers and epidemics of various kinds, are apt to be quite as fatal as the effects of the famine itself.”\*

The land remained untilled<sup>1</sup> for want of cultivators. And in 1789, Lord Cornwallis, after three years' vigilant inquiry, pronounced

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\* This question was pertinently raised in the course of Famine Campaign in Southern India as late as 1876-78 in connection with the determination of the scale of ration for the famine-stricken people. The opinion recorded by Dr. Cornish in this connection is given below—

“A careful study of the condition of the people who have been subjected to slow starvation shows that there is a point in the downward progress of such cases from which there is no possible return to health and strength. Food of the most nutritious character, and in the greatest profusion, is then powerless to save life. Chemical theories as to the composition of food do not in the least help us to explain why people should die with an abundance of nutritious food within reach; but if we carefully examine the bodies of those who have died of this form of starvation, we shall find that the delicate structures engaged in the assimilation of nutriment from food have wasted (owing probably to insufficient use) and undergone degenerative changes, so as to unfit them for their peculiar office. It has been my painful duty to observe not one or two but many thousands of such cases within the last few months, and I need not say that the contemplation of the causes leading to these slow but almost certainly fatal changes in the assimilative structures of the human body lead me to look with very grave suspicion upon all proposals for ‘bare subsistence’ dietaries, and especially when such proposals are known to be out of harmony with the natural habits and customs of the people to whom they are proposed to be applied.”

that fertile fields "where health and plenty cheered the labouring swain" had become howling jungles—one-third of the Company's territories in Bengal lapsing into "a jungle inhabited by wild beasts."

"The great famine in Bengal of 1770", wrote Romesh Chandra Dutt in 1897, "aroused the attention of Englishmen to the defects of the East India Company's administration in the last century, and was followed by the Regulating Act in 1774, by Pitt's Indian Act in 1784, and by Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793."

Marshman's history which was for a long time the staple of Indian history in India—mentioned anomalies and guilt rampant during "a priod of transition between the dissolution of the old Mohamedan Government and the vigorous development of British sovereignty," in India and concluded a chapter by devoting the following three lines to the famine—"These evils were aggravated to a fearful extent by the great famine of 1770, which swept away one-third of the population of the lower provinces."

In his note in the 'Extracts from the Records in the India Office relating to Famines

in India in 1769-88' compiled by George Campbell about a hundred years after the great famine, Sir William Wilson Hunter truly remarked :—

“Admirable histories have appeared of the East India Company. Every one has it in his power to become acquainted with the achievements of our countrymen in India; we are familiar with the outlines of their policy and the plans of their battles; indeed, the general reading public know more about Clive and Hastings than they do of Walpole and Chatham. But our histories are narratives of the English conquest and biographies of the conquerors, not histories of the Indian people. We know hardly anything of the labouring masses during the last century.....”

And he said—“as we approach nearer to it in time, the calamity which from this distance appears as an uncertain speck on the horizon of our rule stands out in appalling proportions.”

As a matter of fact the famine of 1770 stands an appalling spectre on the threshold of British rule in India.

The absence of details of the famine in histories of India written by Englishmen



demonstrates the importance which attaches to the history of a country being written by its inhabitants. The unwillingness of Englishmen to invest this calamity with the importance it deserves in having brought about a social and economic revolution is not difficult to understand. Their opinion about the inhabitants of this country would be evident from the following in the East India Company's First Letter Book—"Trust none of the Indians, for their bodies and soules be wholly Treason." The one concern of the English in those days was to nullify the curse of the weird prophet of the Luciad amid whose maledictions Da Gama departed—the prize a shadow or a rainbow blaze. Mill, in his 'Representative Government,' has been constrained to admit that "the Government of a people by itself has a meaning and a reality ; but such a thing as government of one people by another, does not and cannot exist" as one people can only "keep another as a warren or preserve for its own use, a place to make money in, a human cattle farm to be worked for the profit of its own inhabitants."

We have two descriptions of the devastations caused by the famine of 1770—one in English verse by Lord Teignmouth who was an

eye witness having landed in Calcutta at the beginning of the famine as a young civilian. He wrote thus :—

“Still fresh in memory’s eye the  
     scene I view,  
 The shrivelled limbs, sunk eyes,  
     the lifeless hue ;  
 Still hear the mother’s shrieks and  
     infant’s moans,  
 Cries of despair and agonising  
     groans.  
 In wild confusion dead and  
     dying lie :—  
 Hark to the jackal’s yell and  
     vulture’s cry,  
 The dog’s fell howl, as midst  
     the glare of day  
 They riot unmolested on  
     their prey !  
 Dire scenes of horror, which no  
     pen can trace,  
 Nor rolling years from memory’s  
     page efface.”

“The scenes of 1770 left an impression on his mind that neither an eventful career nor an unusually prolonged period of active life could

efface. When in high office he always displayed a peculiar sensitiveness with regard to the premonitory signs of scarcity."

The other description is in Bengali prose by Bankim Chandra Chatterji which is not only based strictly on but is, in most places, a word-for-word translation of the official record. It is as follows :—

"In the Bengalee year 1174 the crop had not been satisfactory ; on that account rice became dear the next year. People began to suffer. But the officials realised the rent to the last pie. After paying their rent in full the impecunious among the people began to remain satisfied with a single meal a day. In the Bengalee year 1175 the rains were satisfactory. The people hoped that the Gods were going to rain down their blessings..... Suddenly in autumn they became unkind. During the autumn months not a drop of rain quenched the thirst of the parched earth ; the fields of rice looked like fields of dried straw. The little crop that was harvested was purchased by the officials for the soldiers. People began to starve. At first they began to have one meal a day ; then it came to half a meal a day and then they began to starve. What

could be harvested in the spring was wholly inadequate to meet the requirements of the people. Mohamed Reza Khan the Minister of Finance, in his eagerness to curry favour with his masters enhanced the revenue by 10 per cent. The firmanent resounded with wailings.

"People first began to beg. Then who could give alms ? The people began to starve. Then they began to fall victims to diseases. They sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed grain; they sold their houses and land. They began to sell their daughters, next sons and after that wives. Then who would buy girls, boys and women ? Every one wanted to sell and none to purchase. For want of food they eat the leaves of trees and the grass of the field as also weeds. Member of the nomadic tribes and those belonging to the lower strata of society began to eat rats and cats. Many helpless people left their villages. Those who left died of starvation in strange places ; and those who did not do so died of disease and as the result of taking unwholesome food.

"Pestilence broke out,—fever, cholera and small-pox began to roam rampant—small-pox

being most prevalent. In every house people began to succumb. Who would tend the sick and touch them ? No one was attended to—no one was looked after, and no one removed the corpse. Beautiful men and women died in the houses and their bodies were left to rot. On the appearance of the fell disease the inhabitants left the sick and fled for safety.”

As we have said before this is an almost word for word translation from the official records. Only the refined taste of the author recoiled from the truth when he refrained from stating that in June, 1770 the Resident at Durbar (Letter of the 2nd June, 1770) affirmed that the living were feeding on the dead.

Hunter the official historian of British Rule in India has remarked :—

“Twenty years after the famine the remaining population was estimated at from twenty-four to thirty millions ; and we cannot help arriving at the conclusion, that the failure of a single crop, following a year of scarcity, had within nine months swept away ten million of human beings.”

But is it possible and credible that the failure of a single crop following a year of

scarcity could have wrought such havoc in a province well known for its fertility? Before we try to enumerate the causes of this effect of the famine we shall try to understand the actual and prosperous condition of Bengal during the preceding hundred years.

A hundred years before the appearance of the famine Aurangzeb the last of the Great Moghuls, was the Emperor of India. His reign extends from 1658 to 1707. It was during his long reign that Francois Bernier came to India and visited Bengal in 1665. He was charmed with the fertility, the beauty and the prosperity of the Province as will be seen from his description of Bengal from which we quote below a few important portions :—

“Egypt has been represented in every age as the finest and most fruitful country in the world.....but the knowledge I have acquired of Bengale, during two visits paid to that kingdom, inclines me to believe that the preeminence ascribed to Egypt is rather due to Bengale. The latter country produces rice in such abundance that it supplies not only the neighbouring but remote states. It is carried up the Ganges as far as Pátna, and exported by sea to Maslipatam and many other ports on the

Koromandel. It is also sent to foreign kingdoms, principally to the island of Ceylon and the Maldives. Bengal abounds likewise in sugar, with which it supplies the kingdoms of Golconda and the Karnatic, where very little is grown, Arabia and Mesopotamia, through the towns of Moka and Bassora, and even Persia, by way of Bander-Abbasi."

After mentioning among the fruits the mango, the pineapple, the lime etc. he remarks :—

"Bengale, it is true. yields not so much wheat as Egypt ; but if this be a defect it is attributable to the inhabitants who live a great deal more on rice than the Egyptians, and seldom taste bread. Nevertheless wheat is cultivated in sufficient quantity for the consumption of the country....."

Regarding cotton and silks he remarks :—

"There is in Bengale such a quantity of cotton and silks, that the kingdom may be called the common store house for those two kinds of merchandise, not of Hindusthan or the Empire of the Great Mogol only, but of all the neighbouring kingdoms, and even Europe. I have been sometimes amazed at the vast

quantity of cotton cloths, of every sort, fine and coarse, white and coloured, which the Hollanders alone export to different places, especially to Japan and Europe. The English, the Portuguese, and the native merchants deal also in these articles to a considerable extent. The same may be said of the silks and silk stuffs of all sorts.....The Dutch have sometimes seven or eight hundred natives employed in their silk factory at Kassembazar, where, in like manner, the English and other merchants employ a proportionate number."

Bernier than said :—

"In describing the beauty of Bengale, it should be remarked throughout a country extending nearly an hundred leagues in length on both banks of the Ganges, from the Raje-Mehal to the sea, is an endless number of channels, cut, in by gone ages, from that river with immense labour, for the conveyance of merchandise, and of the water itself, which is reputed by the Indians to be superior to any in the world. These channels are lined on both sides with towns and villages, thickly peopled with gentiles ; and with extensive fields of rice, sugar, corn, three or four sortḡ of vegetables,



mustard, sesame for oil, and small mulberry-trees, two or three feet in height, for the food of silk-worms."

After the lapse of centuries Sir William Willcocks—the great irrigation engineer—speaking in 1928 quoted the words of Bernier about these canals and remarked—"I then saw in vision Bhagirath leading Ganga in canals across the plains.....I saw the villagers hurrying to the spoil banks and building their houses above the level of the inundation.....Truly there had been giants on the earth. They lived in spacious times, and designed like Titans." This system of "overflow irrigation" of the Ganges Delta insured health and wealth to Bengal for thousands of years. Bengal excelled in tank irrigation also and this department of activity reached the acme of perfection in Bishnupur.

There are other proofs in history of Bengal's fertility and prosperity ; and it can be proved to the hilt that she was not a purely agricultural province depending for her prosperity on the caprice of the clouds. While for agriculture she had elaborated a system of irrigation she had industries which brought large sums of money to her laborious inhabitants.

In the days of Isha Khan—when Akbar was the Emperor of India, rice, it is said, sold at four maunds to the rupee. Shaista Khan was for a long time the viceroy in Bengal. Full of years and honours he laid down the viceroyalty and left Dacca about the year 1690. During his viceroyalty there was unparalleled prosperity and rice was sold at the rate of eight maunds to the rupee. "His last order was that the western gate (of Dacca) through which he had just passed should be closed, and an inscription placed upon it forbidding all future Governors to open it until rice should again be sold at the same price," This was an incentive to successive Governors to emulate his example and open the closed gate by reducing the price of rice to the same rate.

It would not be unreasonable to think that rice sold at the same rate, in the other parts of Bengal also during the seventeenth century A. D.

We shall cite another example of the prosperity of Bengal. Murshid Kuli Khan became Dewan and Nazim of Bengal in 1706. "Murshid Cooly sent after the Poonya (first day of the financial year) to Delhi a crore and thirty lakhs of rupees in two hundred carts escorted

by 300 cavalry and 500 infantry with the Daroga of the Treasury. Savings out of the Jageers and Khasnavessy he remitted separately. He also sent elephants, tonghen and goonth (a small breed of hill horse), horses, buffaloes, antelopes, hawks, five linen for the Emperor's own wear fabricated at Jehangeernagor, shields of rhino hide, Sylhet mats woven of gold and ivory, musk, clothes of Assam, sword-blades called bunpassy and many valuable curiosities in presents from Europeans."

Such is the picture of prosperous Bengal in 1706.

Then in 1757 Shirajidaula was defeated on the fateful field of Plassey, and the traders from Britain appropriated all powers of Government by making Mir Jafar the Nobab. The apotheosis of the trader's staff into the sceptre of the ruler was as sudden as it was supererogatory.

The condition of the province in 1770 when the devastating famine made its appearance has been described by Bankim Chandra with unerring precision :—

"Bengal had not then come under the government of the English. They used to collect the revenue; but were not responsible to protect the person and property of the

people. They took the money and it was left to that great sinner and traitor Mir Jafar to protect the people's life and property. Mir Jafar was unable to protect himself. How could he protect the province? He used to smoke opium and sleep. The English realised the revenue and wrote despatches. The Bengalee wept and was ruined."

The actual position of the Nabob would be apparent from the following incident chronicled by Scott. Among those who having formerly lived with Mir Jafar on terms of intimate equality had hoped to share the advantage of his exaltation but were mostly disappointed by a cool reception was Meerza Shumsed Dien, Some enemy of the Meerza's informed the Nabob, that his attendants had picked up a quarrel with those of Colonel Clive, who was much offended; and the Meerza coming in soon after, Mir Jafar reproved him, saying, "Know you not the rank of the Colonel, that your people should dare to insult any of his friends?" The Meerza putting on a look of submission, exclaimed, "My patron, how dare I even look the Colonel in the face with steadiness, who every morning of my life make three obeisances to his ass?" Mir Jafar was

silent, and pretended not to understand the meaning.

Mir Jafar who had become Nabob of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by being a party to a conspiracy to overthrow Shirajidaula, his master, found the interference of the British irksome and was suspected of having been engaged in intrigue with the Dutch. On receipt of this information Clive marched to Chinsurah and chastised the Dutch.

Then in 1760, Clive went back to England leaving no system of government in Bengal, but "merely the tradition that unlimited sums of money might be extracted from the natives by the terror of the English name." Vansittart, a Madras civilian "a man of the greatest probity, but utterly incompetent to manage the complicated machinery of Government" succeeded him. In 1761 the English found it expedient and profitable to dethrone Mir Jafar and to substitute his son-in-law, Mir Kasim in his place.

But Mir Kasim was not docile like his father-in-law and the root cause of the famine was the reason why he soon fell out with the English—the spoliation which in modern political parlance goes by the name of exploitation.

That was about a hundred years previous to the opening of the railways in India. It was the usual custom to hoard food grains, The ideal of the Bengalee was to live in his own village home in every way independent of help from others—financial or otherwise,

That even such a people fell easy victims to the ravages of the famine which exacted an unusually heavy toll in human life was due to the merciless exploitation of the English which had reduced a prosperous people to penury in ten years, An idea of this exploitation can be formed from the following :—

“Enormous sums were exacted from Mir Jafar as the price of his elevation. The Company claimed ten million rupees as compensation for its losses. For the English, Hindu and Armenian inhabitants of Calcutta were demanded, respectively, 5 millions, 2 million and 1 million rupees ; for the naval swardron and the army, 2½ million rupees apice. The members of the Council received the following amounts :—Mr. Drake, the Governor and Colonel Clive as second member of the Select Committee 280,000 rupees each ; and Mr. Becker, Mr. Watts, and Major Kilpatrick, 240,000 rupees each. Colonel Clive also re-

ceived 200,000 rupees as Commander-in-chief, and 1,600,000 'as a private donation.' Additional 'donations' were likewise made to the other Members of the Council, amounting in the case of Mr. Watts to 800,000 rupees."

Under the old Imperial firmans, the goods of the Company intended for export by sea were allowed to pass duty free when protected by a *dustuck*, or permit of the President. But the battle of Plassey transferred the power of State to the Company, that is, to their servants, and they rushed eagerly into the inland trade of the country, and claimed the same exemption from duty for their own goods, which had been conceded to the merchandise of their masters. Their servants and dependents soon came to demand the same privileges for their own adventures. The native merchants, moreover, anxious to pass their goods duty free, were led to purchase *dustucks* from some of the Company's servants, even at a high premium, and the boys in the service, with less pay than fifty rupees a month, were enabled to realise an income of 15,000 to 20,000 rupees a year. To increase the confusion, any native trader who wished to evade the duties, had only to hoist the English *nishan* or flag, on passing a custom-

house. In every instance in which this symbol of impunity was not respected, sepoys were sent to drag the Nabob's officers as culprits to the nearest (English) factory, and they soon came to understand the danger of offering the slightest resistance to the most of glaring frauds. The Nabob was deprived of his revenue ; the entire trade of the country was disorganised; and nothing appeared on every side but the most perilous confusion."

Mir Kasim who had to pay for his elevation heavily—to cede to the Company the three districts of Midnapore, Chittagong and Burdwan, to make good all arrears and, above all, to bestow a gratuity of twenty lakhs of rupees on his benefactors understood that the disorders of the times required a sharp remedy. He curtailed the extravagance of the court establishments and in his eagerness to improve his revenues tread on the corn of the British when he wanted to stop illegal exemptions from duty claimed by officers of the Company. Truly justice counts for little where human interests are deeply concerned. He wanted to place his own subjects and the foreigners on an equal footing and that was his undoing. The English were up in arms against him. And finally they



placed Mir Jafar on the throne for a second time. Mir Kasim was defeated in the battle of Buxar in 1764.

The preposterous iniquity perpetrated by the English in Bengal against which Mir Kasim protested raised the indignation of even Warren Hastings :—

“On his way up to Patna in April, 1762, Hastings reported to the Governor what his own eyes had seen. To his surprise every boat he met on the river bore the Company's flag, which was flying also from many places along the bank. At almost every village he found the shops closed and the people fled for fear of fresh exactions at the hands of the English merchants and their followers. What he saw then and afterwards convinced him that the lawless doings of his countrymen ‘bode no good to the Nawab's revenues, the quiet of the country or the honour of our nation.’ It was the old tale of masterful adventurers working their mad will on neighbours too weak, timid or indolent to withstand them, On the one side towered ‘the strength of civilisation without its mercy’; on the other crouched a multitude of feeble folk, debased by centuries of foreign

tyranny, caste oppression, and all the lowering influences of a tropical climate. The people of Bengal in fact were as sheep waiting to be shorn by men who would certainly shear them to the skin."

Macaulay's description is not different—

"The servants of the Company obtained, not for their employers but for themselves, a monopoly of almost the whole internal trade. They forced the natives to buy dear and sell cheap. They insulted with impunity the tribunals, the police and the fiscal authorities of the country. They covered with their protection a set of native dependents who ranged through the provinces, spreading desolation and terror wherever they appeared. Every servant of a British factor was armed with all the power of his master ; and his master was armed with all the power of the Company. Enormous fortunes were thus accumulated at Calcutta, while thirty millions of human beings were reduced to the extremity of wretchedness. They had been accustomed to live under tyranny but never under tyranny like this. They found the little finger of the Company thicker than the loins of Serajah Dowlah. Under their old masters they had at least one resource ; when

the evil became insupportable, the people rose and pulled down the Government. But the English Government was not to be so shaken off. That Government, oppressive as the most oppressive form of barbarian despotism, was strong with all the strength of civilisation. It resembled the government of evil genii rather than the government of human tyrants. Even despair could not inspire the soft Bengalee with courage to confront men of English breed .... The unhappy race never attempted resistance. Sometimes they fled from the white men..... and the palanquin of the English traveller was often carried through silent villages and towns which the report of his approach had made desolate."

Immense fortunes were made by Englishmen at the cost of reduction of millions of Bengalees to the extremity of wretchedness. Not in vain has Dean Inge said :—

"The industrial revolution came upon us (the British) suddenly ; it changed the whole face of the country and the character of the people .....The first impetus was given by the plunder of Bengal which, after the victories of Clive, flowed into the country in a broad stream for about thirty years. This ill-gotten wealth

played the same part in stimulating English industries as the 'five milliards' extracted from France did for Germany after 1870."

"Once to every man and nation  
comes the moment to decide :  
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood,  
for the good or evil side ;  
Some great cause, God's new Messiah  
offering each the bloom or blight,  
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and  
the sheep upon the right,  
And the choice goes for ever twix that  
darkness and that light."

It is not difficult to say which side the English in India took at the time.

This plunder of Bengal "called into existence a new class of Englishmen, to whom their countrymen gave the name of Nabobs. These persons had generally sprung from families neither ancient nor opulent ; they had generally been sent at an early age to the East ; and they had there acquired large fortunes, which they had brought back to their native land. It was natural that, not having had much opportunity of mixing with the best society, they should exhibit some of the awkwardness and some of

the pomposity of upstarts. It was natural that during their sojourn in Asia, they should have acquired some tastes and habits surprising, if not disgusting, to persons who never had quitted Europe. It was natural that, having enjoyed great consideration in the East, they should not be disposed to sink into obscurity at home; and as they had money, and had not birth or high connection, it was natural that they should display a little obtrusively the single advantage which they possessed." This advantage, we need hardly say, was the advantage of the possession of money acquired—oftener than not—by questionable and dishonest means. Clive was "regarded as the personification of all the vices and weaknesses," which the British public ascribed, not without reason, to the English adventurers in India who were perpetually perched on the stilts of an absurd pride. He was *par excellence* a Nabob; and Brown, "whom Clive employed to lay out his pleasure grounds, was amazed to see in the house of his noble employer a chest which had once been filled with gold from the treasury of Moorshedabad, and could not understand how the conscience of the criminal could suffer him to sleep with such an object so near his bed-

chamber." They were no better than vampires which sucked the blood of Bengal.

When we take into consideration the historic facts mentioned above we at once understand the reasons that led to the dire consequences of the famine of 1770, and can at once ascertain the responsibility for its devastating effects.

Hunter has openly admitted that "until 1772 Bengal was regarded by the British public in the light of a vast warehouse, in which a number of adventurous Englishmen carried on business with great profit and on an enormous scale. That a numerous native population existed, they were aware ; but this they considered an accidental circumstance " According to them this native population existed for their gain—as their human cattle farm to be worked for their profit. And as Mill has put it—"when a country holds another in subjection, the individuals of the ruling people who resort to the foreign country to make their fortunes, are of all others those who most need to be held under powerful restraint." In the case of the English in Bengal at that time that restraint could not be exercised. This will be evident from Macaulay's analysis of the

condition then prevailing in that unfortunate province :—

“Every ship from Bengal had brought alarming tidings. The internal mismanagement of the province had reached such a point that it could go no further. What, indeed, was to be expected from a body of public servants exposed to temptation such that as Clive once said, ‘flesh and blood could not bear it’, armed with irresistible power, and responsible only to the corrupt, turbulent, distracted, ill-informed Company, situated at such a distance that the average interval between the sending of a despatch and the receipt of an answer was above a year and a half? Accordingly, during the five years which followed the departure of Clive from Bengal, the misgovernment of the English was carried to a point such as seems hardly compatible with the very existence of society.....Cruelty, indeed, properly so called, was not among the vices of the servants of the Company. But cruelty itself could hardly have produced greater evils than sprang from their unprincipled eagerness to be rich. They pulled down their creature, Meer Jaffier. They set up in his place another Nabob, Meer Cassim. But Meer Cassim had talents and a will.....The

English accordingly pulled down Meer Cossim, and set up Meer Jaffier again ;.....At every one of these revolutions, the new prince divided among his foreign masters whatever could be scraped together from the treasury of his fallen predecessor. The immense population of his dominions was given up as a prey to those who had made him a sovereign, and who could unmake him."

And how did the foreign masters behave ? In the words of Burke they behaved as "birds of prey and passage, with appetites continually renewing for a food that is continually wasting."

The alarming news from Bengal made the Directors of the East India Company uneasy on account the prospects of diminishing dividends. They persuaded Clive to go to India. He reached Calcutta in May, 1765 and "found the whole machine of Government even more fearfully disorganised than he had anticipated." Mir Jafar was dead and one of his sons had succeeded him. Clive concluded an arrangement by which the British took charge of the military and defence departments, leaving the puppet Nabob in charge of the collection of revenue, the administration of justice etc.



as before. But events moved rapidly and the Emperor Shah Alam granted to the English Company the *dewani* or fiscal administration of (lower) Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and also the territorial jurisdiction of the Northern Circars. The Nabob was granted an annual allowance of £600,000 half of which was to be paid to the Emperor. Thus was constituted a dual system of government which was doomed to failure. The actual collection of the revenues still remained in the hands of two Indians—Raja Sitab Roy for Bihar and Mohamed Reza Khan for Bengal.

Clive had come to Bengal with a determination to make a thorough reform. He redeemed his pledge. He knew that if he applied himself to the work of reformation he would become unpopular as "those reavenous adventurers who, counted on accumulating in a few months fortunes sufficient to support peerages should find all their hopes frustrated." But he succeeded in quelling the opposition of the civil service and of the army, all obstacles and opposition bending before his iron courage and vehement will.

Clive quitted Bengal in January, 1767 and was succeeded in the Government by Verelst,

a man of strict integrity but without sufficient resolution to cope with the disorders of the times, The iniquities which Clive had kept in check for some time appeared again with renewed vigour and vehemence. The fat maggots and creeping parasites that breed in the warm comfort of greed and guilt soon eat the discipline which is necessary for good government to the core.

The inevitable evils of a dual government and the mad will of the English servants of the Company combined to ruin the Bengalees who became prone to succumb to the first touch of famine which made its appearance when the rains failed.

The policy pursued by the East India Company in India was intended, on the one hand, to destroy the industries of the country and convert it into a producer of raw materials for the industries of Great Britain and on the other to send as much money to that distant country as possible.

To give an instance of the first we need only refer to the general letter of the Company dated 17th March, 1769, in which they "desired that the manufacture of raw silk should be

encouraged in Bengal, and that of manufactured silk fabrics should be discouraged." They also recommended that the silk-winders should be forced to work in the Company's factories, and prohibited from working in their own homes. The atrocities that were perpetrated to carry out the above instruction have been described by Bolts thus :—

"Weavers, for daring to sell their goods, and Dallals and Pykers, for having contributed to or connived at such sales, have, by the Company's Agents, been frequently seized and imprisoned, confined in Irons, fined considerable sums of money, flogged, and deprived, in the most ignominious manner, of what they esteem most valuable—their casts. Weavers also, upon their inability to perform such agreements as have been forced upon them by the Company's agents,.....have had their goods seized, and sold on the spot, to make good the deficiency ; and the winders of raw silk... ..have been treated with such injustice, that instances have been known of their cutting off their thumbs, to prevent their being forced to wind silk,"

In the 'Ninth Report' of the House of Commons Select Committee on Administration of Justice in India, 1783' it was admitted that

the Company had adumbrated and advanced "a perfect plan of policy, both of compulsion and encouragement, which must in a very considerable degree operate destructively to the manufacturers of Bengal. Its effect must be (so far as it could operate without being eluded) to change the whole face of that industrial country, in order to render it a field of the produce of crude materials subservient to the manufactures of Great Britain."

An instance of the continuous economic drain from Bengal would be apparent from the following statement of gross collection and nett annual balance during the first six years after the grant of the Dewani to the East India Company ;—

Year		Gross collection.		Nett annual balance.
May	April	£		£
1765 to	1766	...	2,258,227	... 471 067
1766 „	1767	...	3,805,817	... 1,253,501
1767 „	1768	...	3,608,009	... 871,622
1768 „	1769	...	3,787,207	.. 829,062
1769 „	1770	...	3,341,976	... 336,812
1770 „	1771	...	3,332,343	... 275,088

Thus it will appear that even in the year of the great famine the collection had not

diminished and that during the six years, after defraying the tribute to the Emperor, salaries; commissions &c., allowance to the Nabob, charges of collection, and the expenses civil, military, buildings, fortifications &c., the nett balance stood at £4,037,152. The expenses incurred on the above two heads were £13,066,761 and £9,027,609 respectively.

“These figures show that nearly one-third of the nett revenue of Bengal was remitted out of the country. But the actual drain from the country was much larger. A large portion of the civil and military expenses consisted in the pay of the European officials who sent all their savings out of India. And the vast fortunes reared by those who had excluded the country merchants from their legitimate trades and industries were annually sent out of India. The actual drain from Bengal is perhaps more correctly represented in the figures for imports and exports for the years 1766, 1767 and 1768 (the three years immediately preceding the outbreak of the famine), compiled by Governor Harry Verelst :—

Imports	...	...	£624,375
Exports	...	...	£6,311,250

“In other words, the country sent out about ten times what it imported.”

Mr. Verelst himself realised the magnitude of the evil, and was constrained to point out its lamentable consequences on the material condition of the people of Bengal. He wrote in one letter (dated 26th September, 1767) :—

“Whatever sums had formerly been remitted to Delhi were amply reimbursed by the returns made to the immense commerce of Bengal..... How widely different from these are the present circumstances of the Nabob's dominions !..... Each of the European Companies, by means of money taken up in the country. have greatly enlarged their annual Investments, without adding a rupee to the riches, of the province.”

In another letter (dated 5th April, 1769) he wrote :—

“I have observed that one great advantage the country formerly reaped was the diffusion of the revenues by large grants to different families, and by the expensive luxury of its Governors. But now the whole amount of the lands is swallowed up on one gulf—your treasury ; nor does any part of it return

into the circulation, except the sum issued from our Investment and necessary expenses ”

The European Companies fought with each other in their attempt to secure the lion's share in the trade with and in the East. They vied with each other in descending to incredible depths of degradation and often suffered insults and injuries which are hard to believe. We give below two instances connected with the British :—

(1) “We (the English) went so far as to try to provide an English wife for the King of Sumatra. That potentate having expressed a wish for such a consort, ‘a gentleman of honourable parentage’ proposed at the Court meeting of the Company in 1614, ‘his daughter of most excellent parts for music, her needle and good discourse, as also very beautiful and personable’. The probable benefit to the Company was gravely debated, “and the lawfulness of the enterprise proved by Scripture’. But some feared that the other wives ‘may poison her if she became an extraordinary favourite.’ The father was willing to take the risk.”

(2) In March 1633, eight Englishmen from the Masulipatam factory started for Bengal and

reached the mouths of the Great River of Orissa on the 21st April. Ralph Cartwright the chief of the merchants with two others went to Cuttack to see "the Nabob of Bengal" who was actually the Nabob's deputy. The Moslem Governor "received the three Englishmen in his Hall of Public Audience amid oriental splendour ; affably inclined his head to Mr. Cartwright ; then slipping off his sandal offered 'his foot to our merchant to kiss, which he twice refused to do, but at last he was fain to do it. , "

Wherever the English had gone they encountered the hostility of the Portuguese and they were determined that for the English there should be no thoroughfare in "the great empires of India and Japan where all Europeans were but humble strangers." And the terrible tragedy of Amboyna where several Englishmen were done to death by the Dutch must ever remain a pointer to the worst features of human nature.

The British in India were not slow to take full advantage of the prize and the privilege they had purchased at a very high price and did not throw to the four winds all considera-



tions of decency and humanity in their attempt to grow rich by exploitation.

Such is the background of the great famine of 1770—painted in the lurid paint of human suffering.

In the early part of 1769 high prices had ruled, owing to the partial failure of the crops in 1768 but the servants of the Company had paid no attention to the fact. The land-tax was vigorously enforced. And no wonder the Council, acting upon the advice of the Mohamedan Minister of Finance, added ten per cent. to the land-tax for the ensuing year. The unfortunate people suffered in silence and prepared to die of starvation. As Hunter has said—"Outward palpable proofs of suffering are often wholly wanting.....The Bengali bears existence with a composure that neither accident nor chance can ruffle.....The emotional part of his nature is in strict subjection ; his resentment enduring, but unspoken.....The passion for privacy reaches its climax in the domestic relations... This family privacy is maintained at any price." This was amply proved during the famine of 1866 when" it was found impossible to render public charity available to the female members of the respectable classes, and

many a rural household starved slowly to death without uttering a complaint or making a sign."

"The fields of rice", wrote the Indian Superintendent of Bishnupur, "are becoming like fields of dried straw." In spite of calamitous predictions the Governor declined to transmit the alarm to England. Mr. Verelst did not sign the latter dated the 25th September, 1769, in which information of the approaching famine was transmitted to the Directors of the Company. And on the 24th December he laid down his office without having conveyed to his masters any intimation of the true nature of the impending famine. His successor Mr. Cartier wrote in the fourth week of January (1770) that "one district was suffering so severely that some slight remission of the land-tax would have to be made." But only ten days afterwards he wrote a reassuring letter informing the Directors that the Council had not "yet found any failure of the revenue or stated payments". The Council was thinking only of the revenue and their placid slumber was not disturbed by disquieting dreams of their duty towards the people who were on the verge of ruin. Indeed up to the middle of February the Council believed the question to be chiefly

one of revenue. And, instead of temporary remissions and advances, the Council raised the land-tax by ten per cent.

That the Board had been fully aware of the deplorable condition of the people would be apparent from the Bengal Public Consultation, dated the 14th November, 1769 when we read in a minute—"The Board has long been sensible of the great difficulty we have laboured under in engaging a sufficient number of coolies for the works of the new fort, and the still greater one of prevailing upon those who are provided to remain there for any continuance." This was due to scarcity of grain, The company had in store 19,000 maunds of rice and expected further supplies from different parts of the country, The proposal, therefore, was "that we might engage to allow every coolie one seer of rice each day, they paying for the same at the Company's price with the contingent charges upon it ; the difference that may be in their favour should, as usual, be paid them in cowries ; the coolies receiving rice at a comparative reasonable price, and which, I believe, will be at an average 40 per cent. cheaper than, they can procure it at the public bazars, would, in my opinion be an incentive

to numbers offering their service at this juncture," The proposal was accepted and the Buxey was "advised thereof." 49,000 maunds the Board had already ordered to be provided and a further quantity was arranged to be brought from Chittagong. Thus we find that in November, 1769 when the Board was fully aware that the scarcity was "likely to continue for at length eight months" and would "be much increased and more felt sometime hence than now" the Company had a huge stock of rice which they had purchased at a price 40 per cent less than the price prevailing in the market and ordered for more—thus increasing the scarcity and sending up the price. And yet it was said that necessary supply for the troops had not been stored and the troops were marched from one famine-stricken part of the province to another—the peasantry complaining "that the military wrung from them their last chance of subsistence."

The inevitable result has thus been described by Hunter :—

"All through the stifling summer of 1770 the people went on dying. The husbandman sold their cattle ; they sold their implements of agriculture ; they 'devoured their seed-grains ;

they sold their sons and daughters, till as length no buyer of children could be found ; they eat the leaves of trees and the grass of the field ; and in June 1770 the Resident at the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding on the dead. Day and night a torrent of famished and disease-stricken wretches poured into the great cities. At an early period of the year pestilence had broken out. ....The streets were blocked up with promiscuous heaps of the dying and dead. Interment could not do its work quick enough ; even the dogs and jackals, the public scavengers of the East, became unable to accomplish their revolting work, and the multitude of mangled and festering corpses at length threatned the existence of the citizens."

Macaulay, writing many years before Hunter, wrote as follows :—

"In the summer of 1770, the rains failed ; the earth was parched up ; the tanks were empty ; the rivers shrank within their beds ; and a famine.....filled the whole valley of the Ganges with misery and death. Tender and delicate women, whose veils had never been lifted before the public gaze, came forth from their inner chambers in which eastern jealousy kept watch over their beauty, threw themselves

on the earth before the passers-by, and, with loud wailings, implored a handful of rice for their children. The Hooghly every day rolled down thousands of corpses close to the porticoes and gardens of the English conquerors. The very streets of Calcutta were blocked up by the dying and the dead. The lean and feeble survivors had not energy enough to bear the bodies of their kindred to the funeral pile or to the holy river, or even to scare away the jackals and vultures, who fed on human remains in the face of day."

He has said—"It was rumoured that the Company's servants had created the famine by engrossing all the rice in the country ; that they had sold grain for eight, ten, twelve times the price at which they had bought it ; that one English functionary who, the year before, was not worth a hundred guineas, had, during the season of misery, remitted sixty thousand pounds to London." He did not accept the rumour. but could not help saying that servants of the Company had probably ventured to deal in rice and "if they dealt in rice they must certainly have gained by the scarcity,"

But the Directors of the East India Company held their officers responsible. What help

the Company granted was, to say the least, painfully inadequate. "Districts in which men were dying at the rate of twenty thousand a month received allotments of a hundred and fifty rupees. A provincial council gravely considers and magnanimously sanctions a grant of ten shillings worth of rice per diem for a starving population numbering four hundred thousand souls ; and the council, after being warned that 'one-half the cultivators and payers of revenue will perish with hunger' fixed the contribution by the Company towards the sustenance of thirty millions of people during six months, at £4,000,—stipulating that any expenditure above this sum must be defrayed, 'by the native grantees.' These Indians did their duty so far as their depleted means permitted—adding £4,700 to the Company's £4,000. Needless to say the total proved wholly insufficient for distribution among thirty millions of people 'of whom six in every sixteen were officially admitted to have perished.' "

On a perusal of the papers Hunter remarked about the total distribution in charity and the allotment for importing grain :—

"When, we turn to the latter operation, a scene of corruption and heartlessness is dis-

closed, which raises suspicions as to whether the pittance nominally granted by Government ever reached the sufferers."

The reason given for this suspicion was as follows :—

"The whole administration was accused of dealing in grain for their private advantage. It was in vain that the Court of Directors wrote one indignant letter after another, demanding the names of the culprits. No satisfactory investigation was ever made ; and the native agents of the governing body remain to this day under the charge of carrying off the husbandman's scanty stock at arbitrary prices, stopping and emptying boats that were importing rice from other provinces, and compelling the poor ryots to sell even the seed requisite for the next harvest. Not without reason does the Court express its suspicion that the guilty parties 'could be no other than persons of some rank' in its own service."

One fails to understand why even in the face of the suspicion expressed by the Court that the guilty parties "could be no other than persons of some rank" the English historian of British India only mentions the "native agents of the governing body" when one should include



in one sweeping anathema the English and the Indian servants of the Company.

True—only two Indians Mohamed Reza Khan and Raja Sitab Roy were brought to trial ; but their trial was a mere eyewash. Hastings was enjoined to remove Reza Khan from office, and to bring him down to Calcutta to defend himself from certain charges of emblezzlement and oppression into which enquiry must be made. Similar measures were also to be taken against Sitab Roy. Both these gentlemen were escorted down to Calcutta where they remained “in easy confinement” pending issue of a trial conducted by the Governor himself. “Both the prisoners were assured by Hastings of the deep regret with which he obeyed the command of his masters in England, and of his own desire to give them all facilities for their defence.”

Referring to the fact that the Court of Directors wanted that “all offenders who could dare to counteract the benevolence of the Company and entertain a thought of profiteering by the universal distress” should be awarded “the most exemplary punishment” Romes C. Dutt remarked :—

“But the ‘benevolence of the Company’ was less conspicuous when their own interests were

touched, and we find no indication of an abatement of the land-tax of Bengal after a third of its population had been swept away and a third of the lands had returned to waste.'

And Warren Hastings wrote thus to the Court of Directors on the 3rd November, 1772 :—

"Notwithstanding the loss of at least one third of the inhabitants of the Province, and the consequent decrease of the cultivation, the nett collection of the year 1771 exceeded even those of 1768.... It was naturally to be expected that the diminution of the revenue should have kept an equal pace with the other consequences of so great a calamity. That it did not was owing to its being violently kept up to its former standard."

Indeed "remissions of the land-tax and advances to the husbandmen, although constantly urged by local officials, received little practical effect. In a year when thirty-five per cent of the whole population and fifty per cent of the cultivators perished, not five per cent of the land-tax was remitted, and ten per cent was added to it for the ensuing year (1770-71)."

We must say that the suffering caused by the failure of crop was kept up and aggravated

by the criminal callousness of the East India Company and the fiendish greed of its servants.

Writing almost immediately after the "calamitous famine" William Bolts who had been for many years in the service of the Company in Bengal, made the following remarks :—

"From a society of mere traders, confined by charter to the employment of six ships and six pinnaces yearly, the Company are becoming sovereigns of extensive, rich and populous kingdoms, with a standing army of about fifty thousand men at their command. In this new situation of the society, so widely different from its original institution, their true commercial interests appear almost entirely misunderstood or neglected ; and it may be safely said, there is scarcely any public spirit apparent among their leaders, either in England or in India. The loaves and fishes are the grand, almost the sole object. The questions, how many lacs shall I put in my pocket ? or how many sons, nephews, or dependents shall I provide for, at the expense of the miserable inhabitants of the subjected dominions ? are those which of late have been the foremost to be pronounced by the Chiefs of the Company on both sides of the ocean. Hence the dominions in Asia, like the

distant Roman provinces, during the decline of that empire, have been abandoned, as lawful prey, to every species of peculators ; in so much that many of the servants of the Company, after exhibiting such scenes of barbarity as can scarcely be paralleled in the history of any country, have returned to England loaded with wealth ; where, intrenching themselves in borough or East-India-stock influence, they have set justice at defiance, either in the cause of their country or of oppressed innocence.”

In his letters to the Select Committee dated 30th March and 19th April Richard Becher, Resident at the Durbar, made a “melancholy but true representation of the present situation in this country” and said, “the districts that have more particularly suffered by the unfavourableness of the season are Purneah, Rajmehal, Birbhoom, and a part of the Rajshayhe ; indeed the only district under this department from which complaints have not come of the want of rain are Dacca and those low countries that are situated to the eastward where the rivers have overflowed and fertilized the lands even this remarkably dry season.” But he said—

“My constant endeavours have been exerted with those of the Ministers to prevent, as much

as possible, our honourable employers suffering by a reduction of the revenues,"

On the 9th May, 1770 the Calcutta Council wrote to the Court of Directors :—

"The famine which has ensued, the mortality, the beggary, exceed all description. Above one-third of the inhabitants have perished in the once plentiful province of Purneah and in other parts the misery is equal."

Then on the 11th September they wrote ;—

"It is scarcely possible that any description could be an exaggeration of the misery the inhabitants..... have encountered with. It is not then to be wondered that this calamity has had its influence on the collections ; but we are happy to remark, they have fallen less short than we supposed they would."

On the 10 January, 1772 they wrote ;—

"The collections in each department of revenue are as successfully carried for the present year as we could have wished."

The reference, of course, is to the revenue enhanced by 10 per cent as recommended by Reza Khan. Thus with the sufferers perishing in every village, road-side and bazar, the morta-

lity was heightened by the action of the Company's servants. The one thing that mattered to them and their masters was the collection of revenue and more revenue.

That the servants of the Company—when squeezing the revenue out of the perishing people—were fully aware of their condition would be apparent from letters written by them.

In his letter received on the 14th January, 1770 Raja Sitab Roy wrote—"Your servant is never wanting in diligence and attention to the affairs of the Sirkar, but such is the scarcity of grains in this province (Bihar) that 50 poor wretches in a day perish with famine in the streets of Patna ; and I am informed the calamity in this district is still more severely felt."

In his letter received on 15th May, 1770 Reza Khan described the condition of the country thus—"As there is no remedy against the decrees of Providence, how shall I describe the misery of the country from the excessive droughts, the dearness and scarcity of grain, hitherto but now a total failure. The tanks and springs are dried up, and water grows daily more difficult to be procured." But he did not forget to say—"To this hour I have laboured as

well in the collections as in every other branch with the diligence and attention of the most faithful well-wisher, and as far as the fallible nature of man would admit, I have been guilty of no omission." And in his letter received on the 2nd June, 1770 he wrote—"Your servant with a view to the Company's property, Your Excellency's good name and his own honour, notwithstanding the droughts which have prevailed, has by exerting his utmost abilities collected the revenue of 1176 (B.S.), as closely as so dreadful a season would admit, though the remainder cannot be collected without evident ruin to the ryots, desolation to the country, and a heavy loss in the ensuing year."

That there was practically no loss of revenue would appear from Bengal Government letter (Revenue Department) dated 3rd November, 1772 :—

"The effects of the dreadful famine, which visited these provinces in the year 1770, and ranged during the whole course of that year have been regularly made known to you..... But its influence on the revenue has been yet unnoticed, and even unfelt but by those from whom it is collected ; for notwithstanding the loss of at least one-third of the inhabitants of

the province, and the consequent decrease of the cultivation, the net collection of the year 1771 exceeded even those of 1768, as will appear from the following Abstract to Accounts of the Board of Revenue at Moorshedabad for the last four years :—

	Rs.
Bengal year 1175 or (1768-69) net collections ...	1,52,54.856 9 4 3
" " 1176 or 1769—the year of dearth, which was productive of the Famine in the following year ...	1,31,49.148 6 3 2
" " 1177 or 1770, the year of the Famine and mortality ...	1,90,06.030 7 3 3
" " 1178 or 1771 ...	1,57,26.576 10 2 1
Deduct the amount of deficiencies occasioned in the revenue by unavoidable losses to Govt. ...	3,92915 11 12 3
	<hr/> 1,53,33,660 14 9 2

“Vincent Smith, in his extreme anxiety to exculpate the East India Company’s English servants said, “they did not then administer the country, of which the revenue affairs were solely in charge of Muhammad Reza Khan, who did not worry about the sufferings of the people.” But Beveridge, though sharing Smith’s anxiety to white-wash the English officers could not be so palpably and ridiculously unreasonable. He remarked—“It would be absurd to blame Government for these natural calamities, and yet it is impossible entirely to exculpate them. The failure of the rice crop, in consequence of



excessive drought, must have been foreseen ; and it was, therefore, the duty of Government, while aware that famine to some extent was inevitable, to have taken the means in their power to mitigate it by storing granaries. They appear, on the contrary, to have overlooked their duty as a government, and to have speculated as individual marchants on the enormous profits which the forseen calamity would enable them to realize. Before the famine reached its height, almost all the rice in the country was bought up by the servants of the Company, and when the presssure came, they found little difficulty in selling at ten times the original cost."

But the Council of Bengal, glad of any means of exculpating themselves, did not scruple to insinuate that Reza Khan's management was at fault. "Without venturing to bring a specific charge, they pointed out a number of sources from which it was supposed that corruption might arise and be practised with impunity" and concluded their letter to the Directors, dated 30th September, 1769, in the following terms :—

"Power without control, knowledge without participation, and influence without any effec-

tual counter-action, was a state of things too important and replete with consequences to be vested in any three ministers, or rather one single man, who, allowing him the clearing preference for integrity, ability, and attachment among his countrymen could not be supposed superior to temptation and at least ought not to be trusted so extensively and independently as has been necessarily the consequence of the present system."

Thus were suspicions poured into the ears of the Directors by means of insinuations and innuendoes while direct charges also were made. Perhaps the Directors who had reaped a rich harvest from the sufferings of the people were not slow to discover that by making scapegoats of the two Revenue Ministers, they would escape the calumny they feared and also save the European servants from unpopularity. They authorised the Governor and required him "to divest Mohomed Reza Khan and every person employed by him or in conjunction with him, or acting under his influence, of any charge or direction in the business of the collections." In a letter addressed to Hastings alone they enjoined him to "issue positive orders for securing the person of Mohamed Reza Khan,

together with his whole family and his known partizans and adherents" and bring them under arrest to Calcutta, Sitab Roy also was subjected to similar treatment.

In the letter of the Secret Committee Hastings received a curious recommendation as to the kind of evidence by which he might be able to establish the delinquency of Reza Khan and he actually improved upon the suggestion though he had expressed his regret at having had to carry out the orders from England. This shows how eager the Company was to escape odium by accusing Indian officers who could well exclaim that if they had served God as diligently as they had done the Company He would not have treated them in the manner the Company did. But the letter written by Hastings must go to heighten the suspicion that the indignation of the Company was a stage-managed affair.

In the letter which Warren Hastings and his colleagues wrote to the Court of Directors on the 3rd November, 1772 they tried to explain why a diminution of the revenue had not been consequent on the calamity. They wrote ;—

"To ascertain all the means by which this was effected will not be easy. It is difficult to

trace the Progress of the Collections through all its Intricate Channels, or even to comprehend all the Articles which compose the Revenue in its first operations. One Tax, however, we will endeavour to describe, as it may serve to account for the Equality which has been preserved in the past Collections, and to which it has principally contributed. It is called Najay, and it is an Assessment upon the actual inhabitants of every Inferior Description of the Lands, to make up for the Loss sustained in the Rents of their neighbours, who are either dead or have fled the Country."

They admitted that the Tax was "equally impolitic in its Institution and oppressive in the mode of exacting," and "had not the sanction of the Government, but took place, as a matter of course." It was also "irreconcilable to strict Justice," and yet was resorted to. In ordinary times it was, certainly, scarcely felt and rarely complained of—the reason being the reluctance of a member of a rural community to leave his hearth and home. The reason adduced by Hunter for the Orissa Hindu husbandman's averseness to change his abode applies equally to the Hindu and Moslem husbandmen of Bengal of the period.—"Among an old-fashioned rural

community there are grave deterrents to changing one's abode. Local ties exercise an influence which modern Englishmen are wholly unable to comprehend, but the recollection of which will live to all time in George Eliot's delineations of the English rural life of half a century ago. Such ties attain their maximum strength in India. They have struck their roots deep in the religion, the superstitions, and the necessities of the people. The whole social system of the Hindus is one continuous chain, from which, if a link drops out, it finds nothing to attach itself to, and no recognised place to fill. It is scarcely too much to say, that an Orissa peasant who left his village in the last century, found himself very nearly as uncomfortable for the rest of his life, as a Chesapeake Indian who abandoned his tribe."

But when a famine has created extraordinary—nay unnatural conditions carrying off fifty per cent of the cultivators the strict and merciless application of this oppressive and unjust mode of exaction cannot but be regarded as highly reprehensible and brutal.

The letter written by Hastings and his colleagues revealed how there was confusion in the methods of collection of revenue which had

come down from the demoralising times of the decaying dynasty which the English found themselves heir to. "The Nazims exacted what they could from the Zemindars ; and the great Farmers of the Revenue, whom they left at Liberty to plunder all below them, reserving to themselves the prerogative of plundering them in their Turn, when they were supposed to have enriched themselves with the spoils of the Country. The Muttisiddees who stood between the Nazim and the Zamindars, or between them and the people, had each their respective shares of the Public Wealth. These Profits were considered as illegal Embezzlements, and therefore were taken with every Precaution that could ensure secrecy ; and being, consequently, fixed by no Rate, depended on the Temper, Abilities, or Power of each Individual for the Amount."

This was even worse than the old rule —

"That they should take who have the power,  
And they should keep who can."

It was anarchy roaming rampart and affording opportunity to the uncrupulous but clever individual or band of individuals to plunder at will to enrich themselves—as the servants of the East India Company and the Company did.

Even Hastings and his colleagues said and admitted that even this system was better than that adopted by the Company as "the Embezzlements which it covered preserved the Current Specie of the Country, and but a small superfluity remained for remittance to the Court of Delhi " That even this "small superfluity" was not lost to Bengal we have seen from the letter of Verelst quoted before in which he, admitted that the sums remitted to Delhi "were amply reimbursed by the returns made to the immense commerce of Bengal."

Even in the beginning of the twentieth century Bryan referred to the drain from India when Russia was groaning under the autocratic rule of the Czar and said "it (the Government of India) is administered by an alien people, whereas the officials of Russia are Russians . it drains a large part of the taxes out of the country, whereas the Russian Government spends at home the money which it collects from the people."

In his historic impeachment of Warren Hastings Burke said—"The Tartar invasion was mischievous, but it is our protection that destroys India, It was their enmity, but it is our friendship."

From what appears in the letter written by Hastings and his colleagues we find that a severe blow fell on the Zemindars of Bengal. That both the Zeminders and the cultivators suffered goes without saying. Speaking of the *Najay* they said that its continuance "would be so great a check to the industry of the people, as to impoverish the revenue to the last degree, when their former savings by which it were supported were gone.'

Comparing the devastating effects of this famine with the comparatively less injurious effects of the famine of 1866 Hunter gave the main reasons as follows :—

"1st—In 1769-70 Government by injudicious interference forced the whole stock into the market at the commencement of the calamity. It was declared a crime to lay up stores of the precious commodity against the coming year ; every one who laid in stock became a public malefactor ; his shop was at the mercy of the mob, and his person in constant danger of arrest. Grain-dealing became a dangerous occupation and at the very crisis, when the country could only be saved by a more than usually vigorous traffic, respectable men were deterred from entering or driven from the



occupation, As no one was allowed to hoard so as, in the words of that age 'to raise the prices', the salutary pressure which immediately enhanced rates would have put upon the people was not allowed to exert its full influence. Such rates force a population to be careful in time ; by lessening the consumption to husband the supply ; and by spreading the scarcity over a larger period to mitigate its intensity in the latter part of its duration.

"2nd,—The absence of the means of inter-communication rendered an efficient distribution of the national stock impossible, even if Government had not deterred speculators from undertaking the task. Importation on an adequate scale was impossible for the same reason.....

"3rd.—But even if it had been possible, by means of roads and canals, to import, the province had no money to give in exchange for food... .."

The first reason is easily understood. "The province had a certain amount of food in it and this food had to last nine months. Private enterprise if left to itself would have stored up the general supply at the harvest, with a view to realizing a larger profit at a later period in the scarcity. Prices would in consequence

have immediately risen, compelling the population to reduce their consumption from the very beginning of the dearth, The general stock would thus have been husbanded and the pressure equally spread over the whole nine months, instead of being concentrated upon the last six."

Regarding the second there must be room for difference of opinion. In the face of the charge against the servants of the Company that they had carried off the husbandman's scanty stock at arbitrary prices, and had stopped and emptied boats importing rice from other provinces, how can the idea of rice being imported from outside be entertained ? The action of the servants of the Company and not absence of means of inter-communication must be held responsible for importation not being on an adequate scale.

The third reason was due directly to the exploitation since 1757 which Dean Inge has called "the plunder of Bengal."

The great famine of 1770 brought about a revolution in the economic condition of Bengal.

Attempts were made to realise rent from the Zamindars who tried as long as they could to save their property and prestige by exhausting their treasury and borrowing money.

The Raja of Dinajpur wrote to the Naib Dewan ;—

“The depopulation and the ruined state of the district which has ensued from the drought and famine needs no elucidation in your presence .....Your servant has no other object in view but the completion of his malguzaree, which he considers as the only road to his own welfare, Accordingly, and in conjunction with the concurrence of Mr. Vansittart, having concluded a proper agreement with the remaining ryots that have survived the famine, and abide in their habitations, I incited them to agriculture ; and yet from want of seed and implements of agriculture great part of their lands have fallen waste.”

He sent the following abstract of the Hustabood of Dinajpur :—

Hustabood of Ram Chund Sen in the year 1176	...	...	18 65,660 : 12 : 2 : 3
Increase made by Rowal Ram Lohorry, Ameen	...	...	2,17,472 : 12 : 8 : 3
			<hr/>
Deduct Seringammy etc.	...	...	20,83,141 : 14 : 11 : 1
			2,36,147 : 2 : 8 : 0
			<hr/>
			18,46,994 : 2 : 3 : 1
Hustabood agreeable to the present capacity of the district, as taken from the accounts of the Motusil	...	...	13,70,902 : 3 : 6 : 3
			<hr/>
Deficiency occasioned by the deaths and desertions of the ryots	...	...	4,76,091 : 14 : 16 : 2

The Provincial Council at Moorshidabad would not listen to the arguments of the Raja and wrote thus to the Supervisor of Dinajpore :—

“We perceive that the Rajah.....values the province at Rs. 13,70,902 in toll, whereas there has been already remitted to the city upwards of 12,00,000 of siccas besides the disbursements at Dinajpore. We cannot hesitate to conclude, therefore, that this estimate of the Raja and the report of the Ameen, on which it is said to be grounded, are entirely fallacious and framed with a view to support a claim for deduction upon the strength of a clause in his agreement with Mr. Vansittart. As his country seems to be very capable of fulfilling the engagements he has entered into, we do hereby authorise you to exert such an authority over the Collectors in the Moffussil as may best tend to secure the balance of the Raja's sudder agreement, and likewise best calculated to obviate any plea on his part for deductions which from the tenure of his representation to the Naib Dewan, he has thoroughly convinced us he has in view. We must desire you to acquaint the Rajah—and the enclosed parwanah from the Naib Dewan will inform him to the same purpose—

that if he does not heartily co-operate with you in answering our expectations, he may lay his account with suffering the deprivation of his zemindary, and being summoned to the city to fulfil all demands."

"The Raja of Burdwan whose province had been the first to cry out, and one of the last to obtain relief, died miserably towards the end of the famine, leaving a treasury so utterly drained, that his son, a boy of 16, had to melt down the family plate, and when this was exhausted, to beg a temporary loan, in order to perform his father's obsequies." Even ten or fifteen years were not enough to enable him to tide over the difficulties and he was a prisoner in his own house for inability to satisfy the Government demands.

The Raja of Nuddea—another powerful personage "emerged from the famine impoverished and in disgrace, and was thankful to have his son appointed to the management of his lands." He thus avoided being treated with ignominy.

Rani Bhawani—whose name was a household word in Bengal and whose revenue from her estates is said to have amounted to Rs. 52,53,000—"a lady of remarkable talent for

public business, retained the control of her district ; but soon afterwards, being unable to pay the revenue, was threatened with dispossession, the sale of her lands and the withdrawal of her Government allowance." Her last days spent on the bank of the Ganges were darkened with the shadow of human suffering which she found herself unable to assuage.

"The two great potentates in the west of Lower Bengal were reserved for a more cruel fate. At the close of the famine, the Revenue Agents, being unable to wring the land-tax out of their depopulated estates, were sharply dispossessed." The aged Hindu Raja of Bishnupur—a kingdom that had successfully withstood the attacks of the Moghul and the Mahratta—pawned his household God Madan Mohon and still unable to meet the Government demands was sent to the debtors' prison. He was let out only to die, his being truly a case of adversity bringing down his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave. "The youthful Musalman Raja of Birbhoom was hardly suffered to obtain his majority before he was confined for arrears."

"The revenue farmers—a wealthy class who then stood forth as the visible government to

the common people—being unable to realize the land-tax, were stripped of their office, their persons imprisoned, and their lands, the sole dependence of their families re-let. The ancient houses of Bengal, who had enjoyed a semi-independence under the Moghuls and whom the British Government subsequently acknowledged as the lords of the soil, fared still worse. From the year 1770 the ruin of two-thirds of the old aristocracy of Lower Bengal dates.” This we have seen in the cases mentioned before. Some of them were crippled and some utterly ruined, almost all of them in debt. Of the smaller Zamindars some suffered imprisonment and were deprived of their ancestral properties and dignity. A new set of Zamindars appeared on the scene establishing themselves on the ruins of their predecessors but could not claim any influence as natural leaders of men and the traditions of the aristocracy that tenderly entwined themselves round works of public utility—the tanks, the *ghats*, the roads, the temples and the mosques the remnants of which we still find in almost all parts of Bengal. This change had its effect on the social system of the province.

Then we consider the condition of the

cultivators. Of the peasant of India Lord Curzon has aptly said—"He is the bone and sinew of the country, by the sweat of his brow the soil is tilled." Fifty per cent of the cultivators of Bengal 'were swept off by the famine. Truly has the poet said :—

"Princes and lords may flourish or may fade,  
A breath can make them as a breath has made ;  
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
When once destroy'd, can never be supplied."

Worse things can be said of princes and lords in England. Green has thus described Charles II :—

"Mistress followed mistress, and the guilt of a troop of profligate women was blazoned to the world by the gift of titles and estates. The royal bastards were set amongst English nobles. The ducal house of Grafton springs from the King's adultery with Barbara Palmer, whom he created Duchess of Cleaveland. The Dukes of St. Albans owe their origin to his intrigue with Nell Gwynn, a player and a courtesan. Louise de Querouaille, a mistress sent by France to win him to its interests, became Duchess of Portsmouth, an ancestress of the house of Richmond. An earlier mistress, Lucy Walters, had made him rather in younger



days of the boy whom he raised to the dukedom of Monmouth, and to whom the Dukes of Buccleuch trace their line."

Though such things cannot happen in this country the peasantry of Bengal as of most other countries have been the pride and strength of the country. The loss to this community was most serious, and even in 1789 Lord Cornwallis perceived the wounds and scars of the calamity and pronounced one-third of the Company's territories in Bengal to be "a jungle inhabited only by wild beasts."

Even under such circumstances the East India Company felt no compunction increasing the revenues. This would be evident if we consider the case of Birbhum. In 1771 more than one-third of the arable land was returned in the public accounts as "deserted"; in 1776 the entries in this column exceeded one-half of the whole district, "four acres lying waste for every seven that remained under cultivation." But the Company increased its demand from less than £100,000 sterling in 1772 to close on £112,000 in 1776. "The villagers were dragooned into paying the land-tax by Mussalman troops, but notwithstanding the utmost severities the receipts seldom amounted to more

than one-half of the demand." Below is given a statement of the Government demand and actual receipt for five years :—

Year	Government demand.	Actual Receipt
1772 ...	£99,413	£55,207
1773 ...	103,089	62,365
1774 ...	101,799	52,533
1775 ...	100,983	53,997
1776 ...	114,482	63,350

In 1765 Birbhum had been cultivated by close on six thousand rural communes each with a hamlet in the centre of its lands. In 1771 only four thousand five hundred of them survived. "The cultivators fled from the open country to the cities; but 'even in the large towns' wrote a Birbhoom Official in 1771, 'there is not a fourth part of the houses inhabited.' The following year, 1772-73, is memorable for the first attempt which Warren Hastings made to adjust the land-tax independently of the Mussalman Minister of the Interior, and the native subordinates, eager to find favour with the redoubtable Englishman, returned the number of communes at nearly a hundred more than in 1771-72. But the fact could not be concealed: depopulation went

steadily on until 1785, when the number had sunk to four thousand four hundred, and of the six thousand prosperous comenes in 1765 close on fifteen hundred had disappeared and their lands relapsed to jungle. Even among those that were not altogether abandoned many square miles of the richest country lay untilled, and one set of revenue agents after another failed to wring the land-tax out of the people. In 1772 the old farmers having thrown up their task in despair were superseded and dragged down to the debtors' prison in Calcutta for arrears. At each new adjustment of the revenue the same thing took place,.....the revenue agents being cast without mercy into the dungeons. When the British undertook the direct management of the district, nearly twenty years after the famine, they found the jail filled with revenue prisoners, not one of whom had a prospect of regaining his liberty."

Ten years later the district became a sequestered and an impassable jungle, "In 1780 a small body of sepoy could with difficulty force their way through its forests. For 120 miles, says a contemporary newspaper correspondent, probably one of the officers of the party, 'they marched through but an extensive wood, all the

way a perfect wilderness'; sometimes a small village presented itself in the midst of those jungles, with a little cultivated ground about it, hardly sufficient to encamp the two battalions. These woods abounded with tigers and bears, which infested the camp every night." "In vain the Company offered a reward for each tiger's head "sufficient to maintain a peasant's family in comfort for three months." A belt of jungle filled with wild beasts, formed round each village and after repeated but fruitless injunctions to the landholders to clear the forests, Lord Cornwallis was at length compelled to sanction a public grant to keep open the new military road that passed through Birbhoom. The ravages of the wild elephants proved a terrible menace. Attempts were being constantly made to get cultivators from other places, to cultivate the fertile but abandoned fields.

Bishnupur shared an even worse fate. How prosperous and well-governed it had been would be evident from the testimony of men like Abbe Raynal and Holwell. Abbe Raynal gave the following account of the place :—

"Liberty and property are sacred in Bishnupur, Robbery, either public or private, is never heard of. As soon as any stranger enters the

territory, he comes under the protection of the laws, which provide for his security, He is furnished with guides at free cost, who conduct him from place to place, and are answerable for his person and effects.....All the time he remains in the country, he is maintained, and conveyed with his merchandise, at the expense of the State, unless he desires leave to stay longer than three days in the same place..... This beneficence to strangers is the consequence of the warmth with which the citizens enter into each other's interest. They are so far from guilty of any injury to each other that whoever finds a purse or other thing of value hangs it upon the first tree he meets with, and informs the nearest guard who gives notice of it to the public by beat of drum."

Holwell also speaks to much the same effect.

The hereditary kings excavated tanks and constructed 'bunds' for purposes of irrigation and erected temples to cater for the spiritual needs of the people. The fate that overtook the Rajah because of the famine has been mentioned before. The capital of the Mollabhumi lost its splendour and became the shadow of its former self, reminiscent of a "land of lost Gods, and godlike men."

Violent feuds broke out among the landed proprietors in their frantic efforts to entice away the tenants of neighbours "by offering protection against judicial proceedings and farms at very low rents." These efforts even culminated in securing cultivators who obtained their land at half price. "The resident husbandmen, unable to compete on these terms, threw up their holdings in great numbers.....and so general did the desertion become in 1784, that Parliament, acquainted with the outward decay but ignorant of the cause, ordered the Indian authorities 'to investigate the grievances and oppressions and all circumstances relating thereto which had.....compelled' the agricultural classes 'to abandon and relinquish their lands.'"

In 1792 Thomas Law wrote—"Every proprietor is collecting husbandmen from the hills to improve his low lands." This must be partially responsible for the population of the aborigines in various parts of Bengal. "But inspite of such efforts the most moderate calculation stated the uncultivated portion of the province at one-third, while other authorities asserted that at least one-half, if not two-thirds of Bengal lay waste."

We have described the post-famine condition of the landlords of Bengal, as also the condition of the peasantry. The condition of the middle classes beggars all description. The middle classes used to live in comfort on the income from the land, the profit derived from trade and the salary of service. Among these classes culture flourished and the arts were cultivated. Members of these classes lived in the villages and helped on the one hand to maintain law and order and on the other to contribute to their prosperity. Post-famine conditions precluded the possibility of their securing labourers to cultivate the lands while the currents of trade dried up and service became scarce. They were thus left to grovel in the mire of misery.

The result of the revolution that took place in the economic and social life of Bengal made the prosperity of the province a thing of the past relegating it to the pages of history. The Bengal about which—as Bernier said—there was a proverb that “the kingdom of Bengal has a hundred gates open for entrance, but not one for departure” came to live only in traditions. The Bengal which had supplied rice to the sister provinces and also to neighbouring fore-

ign kingdoms became impoverished. The Zamindars of Bengal who used to furnish to the Emperor 23,330 cavalry, 801,158 infantry, 170 elephants, 4,260 canon and 4,400 boats every year ; who maintained for their own use horses and elephants ; who spent lavishly on works of public utility ; who never turned away the supplicants with empty hands—were crippled or ruined. The middle classes of Bengal who had been the pride of the province became practically non-existent. The peasantry of Bengal who had contributed to the prosperity of the province almost perished—those who survived the ravages of the famine becoming enmeshed in the net of the professional money lender. The trade and commerce of the province which had increased the wealth of the people were monopolised by the foreigners who sucked up the moisture which had sustained the children of the soil, The tanks, the canals and other irrigation works fell into disrepair and the fertility of the soil diminished for want of the rich red water of the rivers.

The greedy East India Company and its unscrupulous servants had eastern up the prosperity of the country like swarms of locusts when they fall on densely covered fields. A



large part of Bengal had become a thick jungle. And when, after the great famine of 1770 a new set of actors appeared on the stage, Bengal was desponding, drooping and distressed where pillage, pestilence and poverty had ruined plenty, prosperity and progress. And when, about a hundred years later Sir Charles Elliott did not hesitate "to say that half of our agricultural population never know from year's end to year's end what it is to have their hunger fully satisfied" and Sir William Hunter said in the Viceroy's Council—"the Government assessment does not leave enough food to the cultivator to support himself and his family throughout the year"—they could not exclude Bengal from these generalisations. Bengal, after the famine, was a new Bengal bereft of plenty and devoid of prosperity when her foreign conquerors established their rule.

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